

Honour and profit in Greek international relations

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What was the role of honour – understood as ‘the right to respect’ – in Greek international relations? The Athenian representatives in Sparta in 432, according to Thucydides, placed it second after security but ahead of material advantage: having accepted a position of *hegemonia* ‘by this very action we were forced from the start, above all by *deos*, then also by *timē*, and later also by *ōphelia*, to advance our leadership to its present state’ (1.75.3). This presumably means that they wanted allies for security against the Persians, but accepted leadership initially for the sake of enjoying respect, freely granted by their subordinate allies. Material gain became a consideration only later.

A few lines later they put honour first among the reasons why will not give up their position as leaders, ‘conquered as we are by the greatest forces, *timē*, *deos* and *ōphelia*’ (1.76.2). Here, they ‘fear’ what the allies will do if Athens steps down, and this is evidently a lesser concern than fear of the Persians had been, so that fear is relegated to second place. The main reason for maintaining their leading position is to retain their subordinates’ respect, even though it is implied that this respect is no longer freely given but is now a matter of coerced deference.

The first part of the speech (1.73-5) is dedicated to making the case for yet another form of honour: the respect that Sparta and the other Peloponnesian cities are asked to show for Athens. The vocabulary of *timē* is not used here, but the claim is made that Athens is ‘worthy’ (*axios*) of its position on account of their record in the Persian Wars, which was of great benefit to the Peloponnese. The argument is in essence that Athens has earned the right to respect from its peers, who should show their deference by not trying to intervene but allowing the Athenians to deal with their subordinates as they see fit.

The second part of the speech (1.76-7) anticipates the objection that the demands of justice (for Athens’ allies, who claim that they are badly treated) override the claim to respect (for Athens). It counters that the Athenians do not treat their subordinates too badly, and that anyone else in their position would have done the same or worse. The implication is that one expression of respect among peers is to allow the other a good deal of leeway to do what he wants, but also that there is a limit to such deference and that one must act to stop severe injustice even if it is committed by a city entitled to great respect.¹

Within a few pages, we have here a quite complex picture of the roles of honour in international relations. ‘Vertical’ honour is presented as the main element of relations between hegemon and subordinate allies, and this is worth having even if it is enforced

¹ In the concluding section (1.78), the Athenians warn that, if the Spartans declare war despite all this, they may regret it, because (1) war is risky; (2) they would have the gods against them; (3) ‘we will try to defend ourselves against those who start a war – in the same way that you launch the offensive’ (1.78.4).

rather than freely granted. Material gain is a secondary part of this hierarchical relationship. 'Horizontal' honour is a key element of relations among peers and derives largely from past actions – the Athenians stress services rendered in the Persian War, but they note that they could also have recited tales of 'ancient things' (1.73.2), which might have included (judging from such lists elsewhere) wars that performed no particular service but demonstrated great military prowess. Acknowledging horizontal honour is essentially a matter of not curtailing the other's freedom of action, but this right to respect is limited by other considerations, such as upholding justice.

In the speeches that follow, Archidamos makes no reference to these Athenian claims to respect, but the ephor Sthenelaidas dismisses them: 'while they shower themselves with praise, they do not deny at all that they commit injustice against our allies and against the Peloponnese: they may have been *agathoi* against the Medes once upon a time, but they are *kakoi* towards us right now' (1.86.1). This acknowledges the Athenian claim to honour, but argues that the current injustice weighs far more heavily (not least by insisting that it is not just injustice by Athens against its own subordinates, but against Sparta and its allies).

Conversely, Pericles argues that by making demands of Athens, the Spartans are not treating the Athenians 'on a basis of equality' (*apo tou isou*; 1.140.5), and that, however small the demand, it amounts to 'slavery', if it is 'imposed on a neighbour by his peers' (141.1), i.e. he does not dispute that some of Athens' action constitute injustice, but insists that the primary issue is a challenge to Athens' honour, which must be defended. War, he adds, is the best way of doing this, since 'from the greatest dangers derive the greatest honours' (1.144.3). His speech of 430 (2.61-4), when the Athenians begin to lose courage, is almost entirely devoted to the theme that no amount of suffering and deprivation should make them accept orders from Sparta (i.e. loss of horizontal honour), or any loss of 'rule', which is the basis of their *timē* and which may become even greater in future (i.e. loss or increase of vertical honour). The two issues are clearly juxtaposed at 2.63.1: 'You ought to protect the city's position of being honoured for its rule, in which you all take great pride, and you cannot run away from the toils unless you stop pursuing the honours. Do not imagine that you contend about one thing only, slavery instead of freedom, but also loss of rule and danger from those whose hatred you have incurred during your rule'.

Thucydides thus presents Athens as having honour as its primary objective in international relations from the creation of the Delian League to the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, and presents the war as fought to defend Athens' vertical honour in relation to its allies/subjects, and its horizontal honour in relation to Sparta and the wider Greek world. There is no further reference to material benefits, but rather to the great cost of the war effort – the damage done to the land by invasions, and the huge expense of maintaining a fleet – which is apparently deemed worth it to preserve Athens' honour. Spartan peace envoys in 425 are said to negotiate on the same assumption, that Athens will be content with having waged a war that has increased its honour, rather than its territory: 'you keep

what you control, and receive additional *timē* and *doxa*' (4.17.4); if Sparta and Athens are in accord, 'the rest of the Greek world, being inferior (*hypodeesteron*), *ta megista timēsei*' (4.20.4). The first reference is presumably to the honour gained from peers for an impressive performance in war, while the second suggests that Sparta and Athens together could reduce all other Greeks to subordinate status and win vertical honour from all. Elsewhere in Thucydides, explicit references to honour in interstate relations are rather few, and add little to the picture,² but the above is surely enough to show that (even) for Thucydides the pursuit and defence of honour was important in relations between cities.

Accordingly, J.E. (Ted) Lendon has devoted a brilliant book-length study, *Song of Wrath: the Peloponnesian War begins* (2010), to an analysis of the conduct of the Peloponnesian War (or rather the Archidamian War) as a competition for honour between Sparta and Athens, in which the primary goal of each campaign was to undermine the opponent's honour and to defend one's own. Thus, Athenian naval raids, in his view, did not have wider strategic or territorial objectives but served simply to regain honour lost to Peloponnesian ravaging of Attica, and the siege of Plataea was designed to score honour-points lost in the capture of Poteidaia two years earlier. Lendon had earlier argued that a similar honour-focused dynamic applied to Greek warfare and interstate relations generally ('Homeric vengeance and the outbreak of Greek wars', in H. van Wees, ed., *War and Violence in Ancient Greece*, 2000). It does seem important to include this dimension in our understanding of Greek warfare, and I have argued in a number of publications that some of the most violent episodes in Greek (and more generally ancient) warfare – amounting to campaigns of 'genocide' – can be attributed to the extreme anger generated by a perception that the opponent posed an exceptionally insulting challenge to one's honour.³ Examples of this in the Peloponnesian War include the proposed execution of all Mytilenians (countered in Thucydides by Diodotos with the argument that in the long run less severe treatment will be more profitable in material terms, 3.37-48), and the actual execution of all men of Scione

² 1.34, 38 (*apoikia* honours metropolis); 3.9, 39 (Athens honours Mytilene, i.e. by treating it as an equal rather than subject ally); 3.56.6: (Plataeans honoured for their role in the Persian War); 4.86 (Spartans hope for *charis*, *timē* and *doxa* for their intervention in Chalcidice); 4.120.3 (Brasidas promises to 'honour in every way' the Scioneans if they take his side); 6.80.4 (if Athenians subject Syracuse/Sicily 'they will be honoured in their own name', even if Sicilian allies are responsible for victory). Honour for individuals: honours for the dead (2.35, 36.1, 45; 3.58; 5.11); honour(s) gained from performance in war (1.74: Themistocles; 2.65: demagogues' *timē* and *ōphelia*; 2.87: *agathoi*; 5.16: Brasidas; 6.9: Nicias; also 4.47: Athenian generals would rather have Corcyraean oligarchs killed than let someone else bring them to Athens and get *timē*!); non-military merits (3.42: for public speakers; 4.62: 'peace has its own honours without risk'; 5.43: Alcibiades' lineage; 6.16: Olympic victory; 8.73: Leon and Diomedon 'honoured by the *demos*'); institutional 'honours' (1.132: kingship; 5.20: eponymous office; 5.43: *proxenia*); fact of life (2.44: main joy in old age is not *kerdainein* but *timasthai*).

³ 'Genocide in the ancient world', in D. Bloxham and D. Moses (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies* (2010; in part, adapted, also in V. Caston and S. Knippschild (eds.), *Our Ancient Wars*, 2016); 'Defeat and destruction. The ethics of ancient Greek warfare', in S. Tausend and M. Linder (eds.), *Böser Krieg* (2011).

(the prosperous city and territory were given away to the Plataeans, and Athens' material profit was limited to the sale of women and children, 5.32).

However, it seems to me that honour has its limits in explaining the outbreak and course of the Peloponnesian or any other war, partly because there are obviously always also other factors in play, and in part because the ideology of honour serves legitimating purposes and is never a merely analytical concept that adequately explains behaviour.

In the particular case of Athens in the Archidamian War, Thucydides'/Pericles' emphasis on defending honour as the chief war aim is surely an attempt to justify Athenian actions. The allegedly purely defensive 'Periclean strategy', described by Thucydides, fits the aim of defending Athens' honour (both horizontal and vertical) very well, but a closer look at Athens' actual conduct shows that in practice the Athenians pursued wider, more aggressive, and more materialistic aims. Note for instance their first actions when war broke out: they immediately escalated the conflict on all three fronts where the Spartans had asked for concessions. So far from breaking off the attack on Poteidaia, they resorted to a siege on the largest scale seen during the war; so far from repealing the Megarian Decree, they began invading Megara twice a year(!), often with a full general levy; so far from 'letting Aigina be autonomous', they expelled the Aiginetans and occupied the entire island. It is hard to see this as in any sense defensive, or as an effort to merely 'preserve honour' by not conceding to Spartan demands or by making fewer demands of their allies/subjects. If these actions are to be cast in terms of honour, they would have to be described as an aggressive effort to increase Athens' honour by coercing deference. But one might ask if these actions might not better be described as aimed primarily at material gain (directly by colonising the territory of Aigina, indirectly by tightening control of the Saronic Gulf and the Chalcidice).

Similarly, Athenian naval raids are presented as strictly retaliatory and aimed at the Peloponnese. Thucydides' notable precision about the timing of these raids in 431 and 430 surely serves to make the point that they were launched only after Sparta had led an invasion of Attica, and were acts of justified retaliation, not aggression. His reference to these expeditions as 'sailing around the Peloponnese' makes the same point. Yet the ultimate and main target of all these expeditions lies well beyond the Peloponnese, in Acarnania, Leucas or Ambracia, where they make significant territorial gains. This aspect is consistently played down by Thucydides who speaks as if these places are no more than bases for attacks on the Peloponnese, which works in principle for Zacynthos and Naupactos but not for any of the more northerly destinations, which are clearly objectives in their own right. And in practice even Naupactos is more of a base for campaigns further north-west than for campaigns against the Peloponnese. I would go so far as to argue that for much of the Archidamian War, Athens makes only a token attempt – symbolically significant but marginal to its main war effort – to fight Sparta, supposedly the main challenger to its honour, and instead concentrates on extending its western sphere of influence at the

expense of Corinth. This is certainly not defensive warfare, and again we must return to the question of whether it can usefully be understood in terms of an aggressive competition for honour or whether 'profit' or other objectives were of greater importance.

Athenian representatives in Sparta

1.73.1-2. Ἡ μὲν πρέσβευσις ἡμῶν οὐκ ἐς ἀντιλογίαν τοῖς ὑμετέροις συμμαχοῖς ἐγένετο, ἀλλὰ περὶ ὧν ἡ πόλις ἔπεμψεν· αἰσθανόμενοι δὲ καταβοῆν οὐκ ὀλίγην οὔσαν ἡμῶν παρήλθομεν, οὐ τοῖς ἐγκλήμασι τῶν πόλεων ἀντεροῦντες (οὐ γὰρ παρὰ δικασταῖς ὑμῖν οὔτε ἡμῶν οὔτε τούτων οἱ λόγοι ἂν γίνοντο), ἀλλ' ὅπως μὴ ῥαδίως περὶ μεγάλων πραγμάτων τοῖς συμμαχοῖς πειθόμενοι χεῖρον βουλευέσθε, καὶ ἅμα βουλόμενοι περὶ τοῦ παντὸς λόγου τοῦ ἐς ἡμᾶς καθεστῶτος δηλῶσαι ὡς οὔτε ἀπεικότως ἔχομεν ἃ κεκτήμεθα, ἢ τε πόλις ἡμῶν ἀξία λόγου ἐστίν.

Καὶ τὰ μὲν πάνυ παλαιὰ τί δεῖ λέγειν, ὧν ἀκοαὶ μᾶλλον λόγων μάρτυρες ἢ ὄψεις τῶν ἀκουσομένων; τὰ δὲ Μηδικὰ καὶ ὅσα αὐτοὶ ξύνιστε, εἰ καὶ δι' ὄχλου μᾶλλον ἔσται αἰεὶ προβαλλομένοις, ἀνάγκη λέγειν.

1.75.1-3. Ἄρ' ἀξιοὶ ἐσμεν, ὧν Λακεδαιμόνιοι, καὶ προθυμίας ἔνεκα τῆς τότε καὶ γνώμης ξυνέσεως ἀρχῆς γε ἧς ἔχομεν τοῖς Ἑλλησι μὴ οὕτως ἄγαν ἐπιφθόνως διακεῖσθαι; καὶ γὰρ αὐτὴν τήνδε ἐλάβομεν οὐ βιασάμενοι, ἀλλ' ὑμῶν μὲν οὐκ ἐθελήσαντων παραμεῖναι πρὸς τὰ ὑπόλοιπα τοῦ βαρβάρου, ἡμῖν δὲ προσελθόντων τῶν συμμαχῶν καὶ αὐτῶν δεηθέντων ἡγεμόνας καταστῆναι. ἐξ αὐτοῦ δὲ τοῦ ἔργου κατηναγκάσθημεν τὸ πρῶτον προαγαγεῖν αὐτὴν ἐς τόδε, μάλιστα μὲν ὑπὸ δέους, ἔπειτα καὶ τιμῆς, ὕστερον καὶ ὠφελίας,...

1.76.2. οὕτως οὐδ' ἡμεῖς θαυμαστὸν οὐδὲν πεποιήκαμεν οὐδ' ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀνθρωπέου τρόπου, εἰ ἀρχὴν τε διδομένην ἐδεξάμεθα καὶ ταύτην μὴ ἀνεῖμεν ὑπὸ τῶν μεγίστων νικηθέντες, τιμῆς καὶ δέους καὶ ὠφελίας, οὐδ' αὖ πρῶτοι τοῦ τοιούτου ὑπάρξαντες, ἀλλ' αἰεὶ καθεστῶτος τὸν ἥσσω ὑπὸ τοῦ δυνατωτέρου κατείργεσθαι, ἀξιοὶ τε ἅμα νομίζοντες εἶναι καὶ ὑμῖν δοκοῦντες, μέχρι οὗ τὰ συμφέροντα λογιζόμενοι τῷ δικαίῳ λόγῳ νῦν χρῆσθε, ὃν οὐδεὶς πω παρατυχὸν ἰσχύι τι κτήσασθαι προθεῖς τοῦ μὴ πλέον ἔχειν ἀπετράπετο.

Sthenelaidas dismisses Athenian claims to respect

1.86.1. Τοὺς μὲν λόγους τοὺς πολλοὺς τῶν Ἀθηναίων οὐ γινώσκω· ἐπαινέσαντες γὰρ πολλὰ ἑαυτοὺς οὐδαμοῦ ἀντεῖπον ὡς οὐκ ἀδικοῦσι τοὺς ἡμετέρους συμμαχοὺς καὶ τὴν Πελοπόννησον· καίτοι εἰ πρὸς τοὺς Μήδους ἐγένοντο ἀγαθοὶ τότε, πρὸς δ' ἡμᾶς κακοὶ νῦν, διπλασίας ζημίας ἀξιοὶ εἰσιν, ὅτι ἀντ' ἀγαθῶν κακοὶ γεγέννηται.

Pericles

1.140.4-5. ὑμῶν δὲ μηδεὶς νομίση περὶ βραχέος ἂν πολεμεῖν, εἰ τὸ Μεγαρέων ψήφισμα μὴ καθέλοιμεν, ὅπερ μάλιστα προύχοντα εἰ καθαιρεθείη μὴ ἂν γίνεσθαι τὸν πόλεμον, μηδὲ ἐν ὑμῖν αὐτοῖς αἰτίαν ὑπολίπησθε ὡς διὰ μικρὸν ἐπολεμήσατε. τὸ γὰρ βραχὺ τι τοῦτο πᾶσαν ὑμῶν ἔχει τὴν βεβαίωσιν καὶ πείραν τῆς γνώμης, οἷς εἰ συγχωρήσετε, καὶ ἄλλο τι

μεῖζον εὐθύς ἐπιταχθήσεσθε ὡς φόβῳ καὶ τοῦτο ὑπακούσαντες· ἀπισχυρισάμενοι δὲ σαφὲς ἂν καταστήσαιτε αὐτοῖς ἀπὸ τοῦ ἴσου ὑμῖν μᾶλλον προσφέρεσθαι.

1.141.1. τὴν γὰρ αὐτὴν δύναται δούλωσιν ἢ τε μεγίστη καὶ ἡ ἐλαχίστη δικαίωσις ἀπὸ τῶν ὁμοίων πρὸ δίκης τοῖς πέλας ἐπιτασσομένη.

1.144.3. εἰδέναι δὲ χρὴ ὅτι ἀνάγκη πολεμεῖν (ἦν δὲ ἐκούσιοι μᾶλλον δεχόμεθα, ἥσσον ἐγκεισομένους τοὺς ἐναντίους ἔξομεν), ἔκ τε τῶν μεγίστων κινδύνων ὅτι καὶ πόλει καὶ ἰδιώτῃ μέγισται τιμαὶ περιγίνονται.

2.63.1. Τῆς τε πόλεως ὑμᾶς εἰκὸς τῷ τιμωμένῳ ἀπὸ τοῦ ἄρχειν, ὥπερ ἅπαντες ἀγάλλεσθε, βοηθεῖν, καὶ μὴ φεύγειν τοὺς πόνους ἢ μηδὲ τὰς τιμὰς διώκειν· μηδὲ νομίσαι περὶ ἑνὸς μόνου, δουλείας ἀντ' ἐλευθερίας, ἀγωνίζεσθαι, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἀρχῆς στερήσεως καὶ κινδύνου ὧν ἐν τῇ ἀρχῇ ἀπήχθεσθε.

Spartan peace envoys

4.17.4. ὑμῖν γὰρ εὐτυχίαν τὴν παροῦσαν ἔξεστι καλῶς θέσθαι, ἔχουσι μὲν ὧν κρατεῖτε, προσλαβοῦσι δὲ τιμὴν καὶ δόξαν, καὶ μὴ παθεῖν ὅπερ οἱ ἀήθως τι ἀγαθὸν λαμβάνοντες τῶν ἀνθρώπων· αἰεὶ γὰρ τοῦ πλέονος ἐλπίδι ὀρέγονται διὰ τὸ καὶ τὰ παρόντα ἀδοκῆτως εὐτυχεῖσθαι.

4.20.3-4. ἦν τε γνῶτε, Λακεδαιμονίοις ἔξεστιν ὑμῖν φίλους γενέσθαι βεβαίως, αὐτῶν τε προκαλεσαμένων χαρισαμένοις τε μᾶλλον ἢ βιασαμένοις. καὶ ἐν τούτῳ τὰ ἐνόητα ἀγαθὰ σκοπεῖτε ὅσα εἰκὸς εἶναι· ἡμῶν γὰρ καὶ ὑμῶν ταῦτα λεγόντων τό γε ἄλλο Ἑλληνικὸν ἴστε ὅτι ὑποδεέστερον ὄν τὰ μέγιστα τιμήσει.

The fate of Scione

5.32.1. Περὶ δὲ τοὺς αὐτοὺς χρόνους τοῦ θέρους τούτου Σκιωναίους μὲν Ἀθηναῖοι ἐκπολιορκήσαντες ἀπέκτειναν τοὺς ἡβῶντας, παῖδας δὲ καὶ γυναῖκας ἠνδραπόδισαν καὶ τὴν γῆν Πλαταιεῦσιν ἔδοσαν νέμεσθαι·